

Havana Film Festival report New Latin American Cinema

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FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

The Seventh International Festival of New Latin American Cinema held in Havana in December, 1985, marked a new surge of activity in radical Latin American film and video. Numbers alone indicate the growth: from 420 participants the year before, the festival attracted about 1500 international guests. Expanding from one week to two, the event highlighted the latest Latin American cinema but also included two major retrospectives. One reviewed the work of Argentine director and founder of the socially and politically conscious New Latin American Cinema, Fernando Birri. The other honored pioneer Brazilian director Nelson Periera Dos Santos. In addition, daily screenings that ran from 9 a.m. to midnight presented the history of Cuban film, new video from across Latin America, and a constant round of organizational meetings and committees, covering filmmakers, exhibitors, film magazine editors, mass communication specialists, etc.

Prizes awarded indicated the quality and scope of new work. Feature dramatic film honors went to Mexican director Paul Leduc for *FRIDA*, an immaculately precise and restrained, yet passionately lyrical portrait of Frida Kahlo, the Mexican surrealist painter, and Fernando Solanas' *TANGOS: GARDEL'S EXILE*, about a troupe of exiled Argentine dancers scamming to put on a show in Paris. Three documentary awards went to Susanna Munoz and Lourdes Portillo for *LAS MADRES: THE MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO*, typical of current Latin American documentary in integrating emotion and analysis, passion and politics. Also recognized was Birri's disarmingly clever *MY SON CHE*, a documentary about Che Guevara centered around stories and home movies from Che's father, which builds and expands into an extended reflection on truth and myth, personal memory and public image. Documentary footage of Che and examples of the iconic use of his image by leftists around the world are skillfully edited into and against the flow of the old man's reminiscence.

The Cuban Film Institute's (ICAIC) entries highlighted the new first features of a younger generation of directors. Typical of the crop was *MY HEART IN THE LAND*

(EL CORAZON SOBRE LA TIERRA) by Constante Diego, a male melodrama with no appealing cinematic skill. We walked out of it after twenty minutes when a gratuitous homophobic joke got a big laugh from the audience. We missed the feature-length Cuban animation, VAMPIRES OF HAVANA, but many others found it hilarious and clever with an anti-capitalist political satire centered around international trafficking in blood banks. Furthermore, as we watched a Sunday morning's worth of Cuban animation in retrospect, we saw animation as an under-recognized bright spot within Cuban film today. Cuba has been increasingly moving into co-productions, and the Cuban-Colombian TIME TO DIE, Jorge Ali Triana's impressive adaptation of a Gabriel Garcia Marquez fiction critiquing the macho code of revenge and honor in a little rural town, gave us hope that co-production may infuse a new sensitivity to cinematic expression in Cuban narrative film.

This year the Festival presented a retrospective of Cuban film, an impressive body of work, a good portion of which has held its own in international festivals. Through concentrating its efforts and through rationalizing the use of scarce "hard currency" resources such as film stock and equipment, ICAIC has developed production and post-production services, which have now become an essential resource for many Latin American filmmakers. And the mounting of the Seventh Festival is a tribute not only to Latin American cinema in general, but also to ICAIC for creating and sustaining this vital marketplace and meeting place for socially and politically conscious film people. If aesthetically, ICAIC production seems to have drifted to the level of U.S. made-for-TV movies, as an institution helping create and sustain radical Latin American cinema, it must be recognized as the continent's leading force. Furthermore, at the Festival's conclusion Fidel Castro announced that next year the festival would expand to include television and video, and make a major effort to include African film. Also Cuba intends to expand its teaching of mass communications, film, and television to students from abroad. Already the major intellectual and support center for progressive Latin American film people, in a few years Havana may be the most significant center for all Third World communications and culture activists.

Because the Cubans have used a centralized industrial system for film and television, they seem to have reproduced some of the best and worst aspects of the capitalist organization of the media. Since we are media makers and intellectuals who have worked most of our adult lives for alternative, independent, oppositional and grassroots organizations and efforts within capitalism, we remain deeply skeptical of some aspects of the Cuban project. And we find much closer affinities with Latin American film and video people who operate close to mass organizations and popular struggles. We discovered a massive expansion of such work, especially in video, throughout Latin America.

GRUPO CHASKI

A good example of the political and aesthetic media renaissance going on throughout Latin America is the Peruvian collective Grupo Chaski. One of their films shown at the festival offers a witty sophisticated critique of a Miss Universe

pageant held in Lima a few years ago. Starting with extensive use of broadcast TV footage and the group's own documentation of the hoopla, the work radically transforms Peru's official version. It repeats an unexpected reverse shot: we see the contest on TV and then a cut to an older woman with strongly Quechuan Indian features watching the event. The cinematic tactic reinforces a point unmistakably clear to a Latin American audience: What does this celebration of European standards of beauty and consumption have to do with the majority of Peruvian women?

In addition, the film documents a meeting of indigenous peasant women organizers. These women themselves have a brilliant analysis of the function of a Miss Universe contest in their country at this point in history. We see a vibrant and articulate Quechua woman organizer argue that the contest demeans every woman participating in it because the contestants are not only privileged, but also smart and talented, yet made to look like dolls. In conclusion, she and the filmmakers analyze the event as a media spectacle engineered to divert attention from crucial national problems. The film is explicitly both feminist and anti-imperialist. An excellent analytic documentary in its own right, the film could also serve as an object lesson for the spokesperson of the Cuban Federation of Women who addressed the Film Festival women and claimed that feminism was exclusively a self-serving movement and an ideology of bourgeois women in the capitalist world.

Grupo Chaski also presented a dramatic film, *GREGORIO*. It tells the story of a young boy who comes to Lima from the Andes with his mother. In traditional naturalist narration, things go from bad to worse as the family sets up as squatters on the far edge of the desert slums of Lima, a city endlessly expanding through immigration. Gregorio ends up in a pack of other boys, engaging in petty theft, and going from dutiful son to rebellious youth. If the film told only this story, it would fit well within naturalism or neo-realist aesthetics and despairing politics, but it goes much further and transgresses naturalism's norms, as Buñuel's *LOS OLVIDADOS* does. Gregorio and his cohorts are shown having a tough and miserable time of making the next meal. But when they blow a windfall on video games, action movies, porn magazines, and marijuana, the film quite clearly does not set these actions up as deplorable examples of lumpen proletariat degeneracy, but frankly portrays them as justifiable minor pleasures of those at the bottom of the capitalist pile who must live by their wits and daring. And the kids are real street children temporarily become actors. Playing themselves, they come off as clever, resourceful, alert, active, and loyal.

All of this kind of narrative development and characterization might distress a critic stuck in the standard Marxist political and aesthetic categories of fifty years ago. But as Fernando Espinosa, one of Grupo Chaski's filmmakers, pointed out in a discussion with us, the theory of Frantz Fanon and the experience of the Third World in the postwar era have delineated a new class component that is essential in any political and social change: the urban class that exists below industrial workers in Third World cities. As Grupo Chaski has analyzed it, the models of fully developed capitalism have to be rethought to account for the Third World. This implies a different aesthetic as well, one which doesn't simply see the poorest

people as desperate or as a negative example, but which acknowledges the unemployed poor's strength in the face of harsh circumstances and their role as an essential component of revolutionary transformation.

CUBAN FILMS

With GREGORIO, Grupo Chaski deals with a level of political contradiction that seems considerably advanced from that dealt with in current ICAIC films. For example, a morning retrospective of Sara Gomez's documentaries showed what a loss her death was to Cuban culture and how original and inquiring her work was. (See Lesage's analysis of ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, JUMP CUT 20.) She never hesitated in asking difficult questions in her documentary interviews, in going against the grain of orthodox opinion, and in emphasizing the basic intelligence and dignity of all her interviewees.

In her film, THE OTHER ISLAND, about the Isle of Pines, a reform school run on a work-study model, she avoids the Socialist Realist expectation of showing how bad boys and girls learn to become integrated into the Revolution. Instead she shows just how far the Revolution has to go to come to terms with what these adolescents face. She films a young Afro-Cuban man's excitement and expressivity when he talks about how much he loved acting, but she also allows him to tell how women wouldn't play romantic scenes with him because he was black. The drama teacher backed them up, so now he's resigned to working in agriculture. A staff member talks frankly about the kids sleeping together and contraception and pregnancy. Gomez had a sociologist's imagination and a reporter's inquisitiveness. Her work stands out precisely for asking hard questions within the framework of supporting the Cuban revolution. She clearly showed just how far the revolution had to go to come to terms with its human reality.

We offer this discussion of GREGORIO and THE OTHER ISLAND not to romanticize the lumpen, but to question film narratives that settle for pat answers. This problem characterizes even Jesus Diaz's DISTANCE (LEJANÍA), the best recent Cuban film entered in this festival's competition. LEJANÍA is a family drama centered around the return visit to Havana of a young man's mother and female cousin, who had moved to the United States ten years earlier. LEJANÍA uses the dramatic construction of the 19th century problem play and has pedestrian cinematography, at best, but it depicts a situation that is compelling for Cubans and North Americans. For example, in one sequence, the mother addresses the camera and her son in a carefully rehearsed dramatic monologue. She says she can convince him to go to the U.S. to live if she gives a full explanation of why she left Cuba (she was going crazy and was drugged up all the time) and left him behind. He was 16, she said, and it was during the Vietnam War. If he went to Miami, he would have been drafted. Suddenly the shot changes. The son enters. Only now do we realize we just saw an interior monologue, a rehearsal. At this point the mother's carefully constructed rationalization falls apart in the face of her son's frank statement, "You abandoned me." In another monologue, the young cousin, now a New Yorker, reveals her profound sense of being in-between and apart, not living in Cuba but not truly an "American."

For telling the other side, the film should have a powerful effect in the U.S. Cuban community, particularly in exposing the self-justifications phrased as political principles so common among the exiles. In conversation Diaz said that he hoped the film would get U.S. theatrical release, but worried that right-wing Cubans in Miami would use force to prevent screenings there. "It may be better to circulate it on videotape in Miami," he observed. And that might be the most politically effective forum for this family melodrama if it were seen and inevitably discussed within the family with several generations present. Such video would offer a new situation for the problem drama.

However, the film's ending reveals a political weakness — a failure to embrace and deal with the contradictions raised. At the end, the son leaves his house, with his wife's consent, to go off to a previous commitment — a weekend of donating his technical skills to a public project. (He had mastered those skills by attending night school while holding down a regular job.) He heroically strides off, the music comes up and credits roll. It's a nice Socialist Realist ending: the young man chooses the revolution over his reactionary mother. Here it's updated with the hero carrying an electronic calculator instead of a pickax. But this narrative cop-out completely avoids the drama in the situation the son leaves behind. Left in the house in Havana are three incompatible women and a girl: the young man's wife who despises the mother's personality and politics and who strongly suspects he slept with his cousin the day before; the cousin who exudes sexuality just by standing around; and Mom, who finds daughter-in-law much too dark-skinned and lower class, and with a daughter by another man to boot. Well, *A Man's Got To Do What A Man's Got To Do*. But the real drama is how are these four going to get along together? Or reading it against the grain, this guy is taking a walk instead of facing up to personal politics (it's just what his mother did to him) even if he chooses a work brigade over Miami.

Some other factors influencing the Cuban media situation need to be considered. For one thing, the general level of film culture in Cuba is very high. Havana has 166 theatres for its 2.2 million inhabitants. Cubans are avid moviegoers. They see a wide range of films from around the world, not only highly regarded work but also new and old films that are given a critical context through print and broadcast journalism, which ensures a highly knowledgeable general public for the cinema. They also love Hollywood films, and whatever ideological suspicions there might be, Cuban audiences regularly see a wide range of U.S. films, though the most openly reactionary such as *RAMBO* are not shown.

When such a moviegoing public is served by a studio system which aims, like Hollywood, at gaining the largest possible audience and offending the fewest, a peculiar transformation takes place. The basic model seems to be derived from an uncritical acceptance of the model of both communist and capitalist broadcasting and filmmaking: a small centralized group of skilled professionals produce for everyone. The basic assumptions about professionalism seem overwhelming. When we asked about filmmaking outside of ICAIC we learned that such work is taught and promoted by regional and local *Casas de Cultura* (Art Centers). At a yearly festival of such work much well-done filmmaking is screened. But ICAIC's festival

shows none of this "amateur" work — not even as part of their historical retrospective of Cuban film. When we asked ICAIC staff about such alternatives and about making more modestly-budgeted work or creating works for specific smaller audiences, we heard the same response: "We have a responsibility to please our audience, which is a very demanding one." Certainly on one level this is true, but the Cubans working at ICAIC or in the television industry whom we met tended to phrase it as an either/or proposition — use Hollywood production values or create awful junk — rather than a both/and possibility — such as adding another TV channel or film circuit that would stress innovation, difference, and locally generated works.

A number of factors have decisively shaped the Cuban film industry and given it its particular problems and potentials. At the time of the revolution, Cuba had virtually no film production but did have the most developed television system of any Third World country. Economically and practically it would have made sense to further develop television and move into very modest film production. But other considerations intervened: developing a first-rate cinema became a point of national pride, and a younger generation of film people were active supporters of the revolution and in turn were supported by the political leadership. As a result, film production and distribution gained a privileged position within the spheres of culture and communication. And the nascent industry was systematically organized around a Soviet model of centralization and professionalization — a studio system. (A fuller, more subtle institutional analysis of ICAIC and of the development of Cuban cinema can be found in Michael Chanan's excellent *The Cuban Image*, London: British Film Institute, and Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1985).

Some characteristics of capitalist studio systems seem evident ICAIC. For example, one constantly hears rumors about who is in favor or out of favor, which projects have become promoted or postponed depending on personalities and priorities. Economically, ICAIC must now function as a self-supporting cultural institution, so it must produce films which deliver a good box office, and that financial need seems to act as a constraint on innovation and risk-taking. We heard reports that ICAIC runs internal seminars with astute political and aesthetic analysis, yet the house organ of film criticism, *Cine Cubano*, is mostly promotional and shows little critical acumen. Also, since ICAIC is under the Ministry of Culture, and the Cuban television system is under the Ministry of the Interior, actors, writers, directors, and other media workers cannot really move back and forth between the two media. While one assumes that Cuba has built a complex infrastructure within the party and state to delegate authority and responsibility, there also seems to be a top-down mode of decision-making on cultural issues. For example, we heard that because of its depiction of Trotsky as a character and a scene with a passionate lesbian kiss, *FRIDA* was sent directly up to Fidel for approval before its being shown in the festival

While many outsiders for the past few years have expressed disappointment at the feature films produced by ICAIC, it's clear that things are in a process of change — some of it planned and some of it the effect of other factors and policies. After Cuba

has had a quarter century of integrating women into production in other areas, the national film industry has finally advanced two women to feature director status. (The only woman to attain this status before, Sara Gomez, died before post-production ended on her first feature, *ONE WAY OR ANOTHER*.) Compared with the other arts and other cultural institutions, as well as with Cuban public administration, ICAIC has been outrageously slow in this matter of promoting women to positions of full creative responsibility. ICAIC's change may have come largely in response to a recent mandate by the Cuban Communist Party to advance women and Afro-Cubans when candidates for a job are equally qualified, and this policy itself most likely came as a response to pressure from the base.

Certainly the official face of ICAIC at the 7th Festival was sexist. In a special meeting organized by the Women's Federation for women attending the Festival, ICAIC chief Julio Garcia Espinosa proclaimed that the development of film in Cuba had been especially important for women because with the expansion of movie theatres, they found more jobs in these buildings — presumably as ushers and ticket-takers. For days afterward, this remark was repeated with groans, headshaking, and contemptuous laughter by the international guests, and it left staunch Communist Party members in embarrassed silence.

Veteran director Tomás Gutierrez Alea's last feature, *UP TO A CERTAIN POINT*, has some open criticism of ICAIC men in its drama of a middle-aged male screenwriter who falls in love with a younger woman dockworker. Dramatically, one of the film's problems is that the writer is so mediocre a personality that it's hard to figure out why the strong and interesting woman becomes attracted to him. But it may be that the guy represents a realistic portrayal of many ICAIC men who have gotten pretty far on modest talent and male privilege. Certainly capitalist media provides many examples of affable and good-looking guys who have succeeded in the boy's club world on minimal intelligence and creativity while bright and talented women have been consistently excluded or denied promotions. Perhaps the ICAIC system produces a similar situation.

UP TO A CERTAIN POINT also contains a liberal gesture toward gays. When one character makes a distinctly homophobic comment about someone, the remark is mildly put down by a more sympathetic character. The obvious implication is that "good people" don't go around saying such things. A big step forward in Cuban cultural politics. Yet this really touches on the matter of homophobia in the most marginal way possible. Doubtless it will be many, many years before a sympathetic gay or lesbian character appears in a Cuban film and gets to tell off someone who makes a homophobic remark.

If such a moment does finally occur in Cuban film, it will probably first appear in a comedy, for it is in this genre that the most energetic and creative work seems to be taking place. Rolando Diaz's *THE BIRDS ARE SHOOTING THE SHOTGUN (LOS PAJAROS TIRANDOLE A LA ESCOPETA)* has been a commercially successful comedy. Its plot elaborates the complications that occur when a young man becomes irrationally upset when he discovers his mother is having an affair with his fiancée's father. The film pokes fun at macho roles and is cleverly shot with

narrative developments often shown visually, while the soundtrack plays music and witty lyrics by the new band Van Van. It uses comedy to deliver a now-familiar Cuban film message — that men have to learn how to change in order to create better relationships.

This film and Manuel Octavio Gomez's PATAKIN show some of the best aspects of the Cuban studio system. PATAKIN is a musical comedy with lots of wacky and wonderful production numbers, including one on a farm with a chorus line of tractors. Such films can only be made with the equipment, diverse technical skills, and capital investment that a studio system can bring into being. The question remains open as to whether Cuba, having created a studio system producing films in quantity and quality and serving as a socialist model for all of Latin America, can also develop a situation favorable to local and popular initiatives. It may be that the rapid expansion of progressive video work throughout Latin America, based on a more decentralized model, will spur the Cubans to move in this direction as well. Video is serving directly in popular struggles in many countries at present, and in Nicaragua important and fresh media production is taking place in the mass organizations such as the trade unions. As examples of these efforts become better known in Cuba at future festivals, they may well have a powerful effect in persuading Cubans of the desirability of establishing a decentralized and popular media system which would complement and democratize the present studio system.

[To top](#) [Current issue](#) [Archived essays](#) [Jump Cut home](#)